

*Remarks of Jill Kuruc
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**Before the Education Committee
On S.B. No. 24, AN ACT CONCERNING EDUCATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS
Section 29, *Teacher Tenure***

February 21, 2012

Good afternoon Senator Stillman and Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee. My name is Jill Kuruc, and I'm a Kindergarten teacher in Easton. I am here today to comment on Senate Bill 24, Section 29.

I live in Sandy Hook, CT, where my 7-year-old daughter attends school. I also have two boys attending college at the University of CT. I have been a teacher at Samuel Staples E.S. in Easton, CT for the past 11 years. I am writing to ask your support as both a parent and educator, to make sure that Senate Bill #24 does not pass. I am pleading with you to consider the impact this bill would have on the many dedicated teachers who impact the lives of our CT children every day.

I am very angry with Governor Dannel P. Malloy's proposed education overhaul. This bill disrespects the high standards that teachers meet to maintain their professional status.

The governor's bill lowers standards in a long list of ways. Generally, his proposal allows greater numbers of inexperienced individuals to teach our children, and he makes it easier for out-of-state teachers to migrate to Connecticut. He even goes so far as to say that meeting National Board Certification, a universally acknowledged high standard, is no longer a reasonable hurdle to grant Connecticut certification to out-of-state educators.

The governor's proposals about certification and tenure involve creating a complex system that replaces high objective state standards for teacher certification with a system that ties subjective local evaluations by principals to both teachers' certification and renewable tenure. Districts would have to base salary schedules on the governor's new certification levels, not education and experience as is done now. There would be an apparent incentive for Boards of Education to set lower salaries for teachers. Moving from one level of certification to the next would be based solely on a principal's evaluation, not taking into account experience or advanced degrees. Teachers' ability to hold a license to work in any district would be determined by one person's judgment.

Although some may perceive our education system as one in which teachers get tenure "just by showing up," in reality there is already an effective and rigorous evaluation process in many districts in which teachers are evaluated through multiple observations, committee participation, curriculum development, professional development pursuits, parent communication, and collaborative teamwork with colleagues. Would our elected officials like to have their salary based solely on the approval rating of their constituents at any given time?

This bill will crush the current teacher certification system and eliminates the master's degree requirement. The governor would set three levels of certificate – initial, professional, and (optional) master educator certificate (eliminates provisional). In doing this, the proposed bill devalues advanced degrees that teachers earn to improve skills. The lack of requirement for a master's degree for a professional certificate would suggest lower salaries for teachers.

It establishes new evaluation ratings and ties evaluations to salaries. Our district places special education populations in certain rooms for the purpose of making service in the least restrictive environment possible. Because of this practice, some teachers' scores will not reflect the quality of their skill and competence. This is a very common practice and would make teachers more apprehensive about working with certain populations for fear of losing their job. Evaluations would become the basis for salary, the level of certification a teacher could hold and retain, and tenure— all would be based on the judgment of one person in a district. That is very scary!

Teachers who have taken a more active role in the school and voiced their opinions would be at greater risk for retribution, and this would make sharing an opinion and democratic practice impossible.

If teachers should be subject to these dramatic changes in their job security and tenure, then maybe every part of government should be overhauled as well. We should have term limits. Let's tell our government representatives that even if they are doing a wonderful job, they can only do that job two times. How many people would go into politics?

The bill requires movement through the salary schedule to be based on a teacher's evaluation. It concentrates an enormous authority in the hands of the state commissioner of education and the local superintendent of schools. The state commissioner of education would have the authority to terminate an existing local or regional board of education and appoint new board members. The state commissioner of education would have the power to waive "any rule" that inhibits or hinders the ability of the department to implement new school initiatives. Local superintendents would no longer be required to be certified. The commissioner would have the sole authority to appoint whomever he deems to be "exceptionally qualified" with no established criteria and regardless of his or her background or qualifications.

There are so many other factors that contribute to students' success (diet and consistent meals, home life, medical conditions, and family dynamics, including abuse and neglect) that are out of our control. Unfortunately, there are some districts in Connecticut that face more of these challenges than others. Day after day, teachers strive to provide a balanced and safe environment that combats these conditions. Despite teachers' efforts, these factors continue to undeniably affect students' academic performance. As a result, standardized test scores are not an accurate measure of an educator's effectiveness.

This bill relegates teachers' voices to an advisory role in critical decision making. The bill eliminates the requirement that districts have Professional Development (PD) committees with teachers. The proposal takes away the statutory right of teachers to be on PD committees and gives complete control of PD to the district.

Another proposal within the plan to grant teachers tenure involves parental and student input. Teachers understand that positive parent-teacher relationships are valuable for the growth of a child, and we strive to foster these at every opportunity; however, I feel that parents should not have the authority to determine if their child's teacher is deserving of a tenure position. In other professional fields, such as medical and legal occupations, clients are not given the right to determine eligibility for licensure or certification. There are too many factors that can affect objectivity in a parent's judgment about a teacher's qualifications.

We all have a common goal. That goal is to provide the highest quality of education to every student. We find it impossible to reach this goal if educators, the pulse of our future, are excluded from the decision-making process. I urge you to make sure that Senate Bill #24 does not pass and that your constituents have a voice in keeping Connecticut one of the finest educational systems in America. The future of public education in Connecticut depends on it. Please consider helping the dedicated teachers of CT to have a say in this bill.